

U.S. MARINES HOLD THE LINE

AT OLD LINE FINE WINE, SPIRITS & BISTRO IN BELTSVILLE

By Teddy Durgin

Anyone who grew up during the 1980s and '90s in Prince George's County most likely shopped at the old Circuit City store on Route 1 in Beltsville. You might have bought your first DVD there. Or quite possibly that's where you purchased your dream big-screen TV. The Black Friday sales were legendary. And on a Saturday or Sunday during the holiday season, you were lucky to get a parking spot anywhere close to the building.

But for everything there is a season. In November 2008, the big-box electronics retailer filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection. The following January, the chain announced it was closing all remaining stores ~ a directive that culminated in March 8, 2009, being the final day of operations after 60 years in business.

It took some imagination. But that old Circuit City store at 11011 Baltimore Avenue (aka Rte. 1) has recently found new life as Old Line Fine Wine, Spirits & Bistro. Upon opening, it immediately ranked as one of Maryland's largest fine wine superstores. But the establishment is more than top-shelf Chardonnays and Merlots. Old Line sells a wide variety of craft, domestic and imported beers and spirits. And the casual dining restaurant (The Bistro) tucked into the back of the store ~ past where people used to shop for PCs and radio boomboxes ~ serves small and large plates and offers 20 beers on draft.

Larry Pendleton runs the place as Managing Partner with his son, Larry Jr. Both are former Marines and have shown considerable discipline in getting such an ambitious business off the ground. Superior customer service has been their focus from day one. "We're constantly trying to improve the guest experience," Pendleton Sr. remarked, during a recent interview with the *Beverage Journal*. "We don't call our customers 'customers.' We're in the hospitality business. Everyone



U.S. MARINES LARRY PENDLETON AND LARRY PENDLETON, JR. OF OLD LINE FINE WINE, SPIRITS & BISTRO.

who walks through that door is our guest, and we want them to have an amazing experience."

He continued, "I like it when people come to me or e-mail me and say, 'I had this label in a restaurant in St. Louis or wherever, and I loved it!' I'll research it, and if I can, I'll bring it in for them. We're getting a reputation of being the 'go-to guys,' and I love that. I don't think there are a lot of stores who take the time to do that for people."

Pendleton, though, acknowledges the challenges of operating in such a large space. After all, it's not every day you find a place that once had row after row of CDs for every music taste that now has row after row of wine and spirits for every drinking taste.

He said, "Because we have such a big place, there has been a real separation with the store and the bistro. Not a physical separation. But the staff of the store didn't feel like part of the bistro and vice versa. We're revamping the culture and doing more cross-promotion with the store and the restaurant. We're teaching the people in the restaurant what we do in the store, and we're doing the same thing for the people who are out on the

floor of the store about what we're doing in the bistro. You literally have to walk through the store to get to the bistro. There's no separate entrance. So, we're really pulling the team together to all work for one common goal. We're working for one place, not two."

With the restaurant, the Pendletons like to host wine dinners and beer dinners that pair foods with the various labels. These meals frequently sell out. What is Pendleton's favorite? He was quick to answer: "In January every year, we do a supper with the Scottish poet Robert Burns. I am of Scottish descent, so I wear a kilt. We have a bagpiper. 'Pay the piper' came from that, by the way. When you pay the piper, you give him a shot of Scotch for piping the haggis in."

Another challenge is the same one the old Circuit City store faced. Exposure. "We sit in the back of a shopping center," he acknowledged. "Route 1 is the second busiest road in the state of Maryland next to Rockville Pike. I've had people come in from half a mile away and say, 'I didn't know you were here!' And I've got a really big sign! So, we're still finding our way." ■